

Freedom of the Press

The Moroccan government's promised campaign to expand press freedom languished in 2013, as proposed reform legislation failed to be finalized over the course of the year. Unofficial but clear restrictions remained in place, discouraging coverage of politically and socially sensitive subjects, while restrictive laws continued to be used to clamp down on journalists and news sources.

Morocco's new constitution, passed in 2011, guarantees freedom of the press, but its vague language enables great latitude for interpretation and hinders enforcement of media protections. The press law prohibits criticism of the monarchy and Islam and effectively bars independent coverage of certain taboo subjects, including the royal family and the status of Western Sahara. Defamation is a criminal offense punishable by up to one year imprisonment and/or fines of up to approximately \$12,000. Legal cases are a primary method of repressing critical expression. In January 2013, Youseff Jajili, editor in chief of the weekly *Alaan*, was arrested and charged with criminal defamation for an article in which he reported that a government minister had used public money to order alcohol while on a taxpayer-funded trip, a charge embarrassing to the official given the Islamic prohibition on consumption of alcohol. Jajili was fined 50,000 dirhams (\$6,000) and given a two-month suspended sentence in June.

Journalists are sometimes imprisoned on trumped-up criminal charges, as opposed to explicitly press-related offenses. For example, Ali Anouzla, editor of the Arabic edition of the news website *Lakome*, was arrested in September 2013 and charged with "glorifying terrorism" for posting an article that included a link to the Spanish paper *El País*, which linked to a YouTube video in which an extremist group criticized Morocco's King Mohamed VI and called for Moroccan youth to wage jihad. Anouzla's supporters argued that the charges were a pretext to target the editor, whose coverage has been critical of the king in the past and who had earlier in the year broken a politically damaging story about the king accidentally pardoning a child molester. Anouzla was freed on bail after 38 days in prison, but faces a sentence of up to 20 years in prison if convicted. Blogger Mohamed Sokrate, who was arrested in May 2012 and sentenced to two years in prison on drug possession and trafficking charges, remained in prison in 2013. Press freedom advocates alleged that Sokrate was in fact imprisoned because of his reporting on the king and other sensitive topics. Blogger and journalist Mustafa al-Hasnawi, a known advocate for the rights of incarcerated members of the Islamic movement, was arrested in May 2013; in July, he was sentenced to a four-year jail term on terrorism charges, although the sentence was reduced on appeal to three years in October. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) condemned his incarceration, asserting that he was punished for defending human rights and criticizing the government.

The Moroccan Parliament considered proposed legislation during the year that would ostensibly improve media regulation and enhance press freedom. These include a press and publications law that would eliminate custodial sentences for press-related crimes but still allow for steep fines of up to 300,000 dirhams (\$35,500); a law that would establish a National Press Council but effectively require journalists to obtain a national press card; and a law that would allow the judiciary to shut down websites containing defamatory material on an emergency basis. Critics argued that many of the draft laws were seriously flawed. However, none of the above initiatives had developed into law at year's end. A draft internet law, called the "Digital Code," was introduced by authorities in November 2013 but then withdrawn in December following concerns raised by activists that certain provisions could be used to stifle online freedoms; it remained under debate at year's end.

King Mohamed VI and his government wield considerable control over the editorial content of domestic broadcast media. Government oversight includes the authority to appoint the heads of all public radio and television stations. The government also appoints the president and four of eight board members at the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication, which issues broadcast licenses and monitors content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. The prime minister appoints two additional board members, and the presidents of the two chambers of Parliament each appoint one of the remaining members. Publications must also obtain accreditation in order to operate, and can be suspended or censored if their content is deemed a threat to public order.

Authorities have sporadically blocked certain websites and online tools, including news sites, Google Earth, and blogging platforms. The state also occasionally cracks down on those who produce critical online content on issues such as the monarchy, religion, or official corruption. This practice intensified with the rise of the February 20 protest movement following the eruption of prodemocracy uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011. Sites blocked in 2013 included Instagram and Pinterest, and the news site *Lakome*, which was blocked following the arrest of Anouzla. Anouzla originally requested that the Arabic version of the site, for which he was responsible, be temporarily blocked while he was in custody and unable to update it, but authorities blocked the entire site and maintained the block after Anouzla's release on bail.

Self-censorship is widespread, and journalists tend to stay within unofficial red lines to avoid heavy fines, prison sentences, or extralegal intimidation and physical violence in retribution for their stories. Some journalists continue to push the boundaries of permissible coverage and report on sensitive subjects such as the military, national security, religion, and sexuality, but most have moved outside Morocco to escape government harassment and surveillance and work in exile.

Foreign publications are widely available in Morocco, but the foreign media are not immune from government repression. Authorities rescinded accreditation for all journalists working in Morocco for Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network in 2010, effectively suspending the network's reporting from the country. The bureau remained closed until April 2013, when it reopened following negotiations with the government. Foreign publications are also occasionally banned or censored. The Spanish daily *El País* was banned twice in 2012, first for publishing a cartoon of the king and later for coverage of a book that was critical of the monarch.

Physical attacks on journalists are less common than legal actions, though harassment and intimidation do occur. In August 2012, Ali Lmrabet, who runs an online news portal, was beaten and robbed by unidentified men who he claimed were plainclothes policemen who had previously harassed him. Agence France-Presse journalist Omar Brouksy was also the target of police violence in August and again in October, after which the government rescinded Brouksy's press accreditation for publishing "an unprofessional dispatch" that implied the king was not politically neutral. However, there were no similar cases in 2013.

According to the constitution, the press in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little in the way of independent Sahrawi media. Moroccan authorities are sensitive to any reporting that is not in line with the state's official position on the territory's status, and they continue to expel, detain, or harass Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who write critically on the issue. Alternative viewpoints and resources such as online media or independent broadcasts from abroad are not easily accessible to the population.

There are almost 20 daily and more than 80 weekly publications in circulation in Morocco, and it is estimated that more than 70 percent of these are privately owned. Broadcast media are still dominated by the state, and FM radio stations are largely prohibited from airing programs of a political nature. However, residents can access critical reports through pan-Arab and other satellite television channels. The regime uses advertising and subsidies, as well as aggressive financial harassment, to repress critical media

coverage and intimidate the independent press.

While the internet is used as a platform for journalism and the dissemination of news, the government exerts control over online media through the press law as well as censoring content, and the high rate of illiteracy in parts of the country limits its reach as a news source. However, internet use, particularly social media use, continues to grow at a fast rate. Approximately 56 percent of the population regularly accessed the internet in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

66

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

24

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

18